DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 336 203 PS 019 907

AUTHOR Horowitz, Sandra V.
TITLE The Coping Strategies of Homeless Children and Adolescents.
SPONS AGENCY Grant (W.T.) Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Adolescents; *Coping; *Elementary School Students; Elementary Secondary Education; *Emotional Response; Family Problems; *Homeless People; Locus of Control; Lower Class Students; Minority Group Children; Mothers; Peer Relationship; Preadolescents; Problem Solving; Sex Differences; *Stress Management

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the stresses confronting homeless adolescents and the coping strategies that enable stressed urban minority children to achieve in school. A total of 176 homeless children ranging in age from 9 to 14 years were interviewed, and 199 control subjects who were not homeless were surveyed. Academic achievement was determined from achievement test scores. Several instruments measured children's coping strategies and social relationships, especially the Adolescent Coping Inventory based on the adult scale created by Folkman and Lazarus (1986). The five coping strategies described in this paper are: (1) reappraising in a positive manner; (2) seeking social support; (3) distancing; (4) confronting; and (5) self-blaming. Results indicated that homeless children were more likely to focus on interpersonal conflicts and environmental stresses than were housed children. Homeless children used positive reappraisal more often for school problems than for other problems. Nonachievers reported more interpersonal conflicts than achievers. Compared to achievers, nonachievers were more likely to use positive reappraisal, distancing, and confronting, and were more likely to seek social support. Girls did not have lower levels of interpersonal conflict than boys. Girls used more confrontive coping strategies than boys did to deal with interpersonal difficulties. Youngsters with an external locus of control used more positive reappraisal and confronting strategies than did youngsters with an internal locus of control. A reference list of 19 items is provided. (BC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED336203

The Coping Strategies of Homeless Children and Adolescents

Sandra V. Horowitz

Cornell University Medical College

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sandra V Horowitz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS 019907

Paper presented at an Invited Symposium for Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in Seattle, April, 1991. This study was supported by a grant from the W. T. Grant Foundation to Irwin E. Redlener, Principal Investigator, and the author, Co-Principal Investigator. We wish to thank Randall Sowder, Karen Redlener, Claudia Nelson, Carolyn Springer, Heather Hobbs, Susan Fraser, Gloria Liu, and all the interviewers for their assistance on this project.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Coping Strategies of Homeless Adolescents

When Dr. Irwin Redlener and I began investigating homeless adolescents and their mothers in January, 1989, approximately 9,500 children were in the New York City hotel-shelter system (Rafferty & Rollins, 1989). Children in these chaotic circumstances suffered physically and psychologically. They frequently had lower self-perceptions for academic competence and social acceptance (Masten, 1990). Many experienced serious anxiety, depression and learning problems (Bassuk, Rubin, & Lauriat, 1986). Deprived of a home, children placed in welfare hotels averaged changing schools at least once a year, sometimes more (Redlener & Horowitz, 1990). Stigmatized by their new classmates as "hotel kids," many homeless adolescents still maintained a highly positive attitude towards school (Horowitz, Kose & Springer, 1988).

Although a majority of homeless adolescents were academically in trouble, a consistent number of these children did well in school regardless of their family's circumstances (BOE, 1988). This was the phenomenon that intrigued us. Thirty percent of those who had test scores were achieving at grade level or above on the Math Achievement Test (New York City Board of Education, 1988). (One of the methodological difficulties in measuring these children was that an appreciable number of homeless students did not have test scores due to mobility and frequent absenteeism.)

Our primary interest in this project was to investigate the

stresses confronting homeless adolescents as well as the coping strategies (i.e., behaviors, thoughts and feelings) which enable highly- and chronically-stressed, urban minority children to achieve in school.

Most of the research on coping strategies has been conducted with adult subjects. However, a few investigators have begun examining how these concepts may work in research with younger subjects (Compas, 1987; Glyshaw, Cohen & Towbes, 1989). Briefly, coping efforts are perceived as having one of two goals: problem solving or the management of negative emotions. Problem-focused coping refers to direct action to alter the stressful relation between the individual and the environment. Emotion-focused coping involves attempts by the individual to regulate the emotional distress caused by the stressful event, e.g., tactics such as avoidance, distancing, seeking social support, positive reappraisal, accepting responsibility, and self-control. Both general types of coping are important in handling stress and the most adaptive use of one type versus the other will depend upon the stressor.

The meaning attached to the stress and the perceived coping options available to the individual play a considerable role in adjusting to bad outcomes (Folkman, Lazarus, Gruen, DeLongis, 1986). The most successful coping efforts appear to be when subjects match events perceived as controllable with problem-focused coping and events perceived as having low controllability

with emotion-focused coping.

Certain stable characteristics of the child or environment have emerged as protective factors against the effects of chronic stress. These moderator variables include sex, cognitive appraisal systems, sense of control and strength of support systems (Masten, 1989; Masten & Garmezy, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1982).

Our first task was to identify the stresses which were most problematic for homeless adolescents. Based on their isolation from other children at a time when peer relationships are very important, we hypothesized that homeless children would report a considerable number of interpersonal problems. Conversely, based on the severity of their situation, we expected very few routine or introspective worries would be reported.

Secondly, we explored the specific thoughts, behaviors, and feelings that comprise homeless adolescents' reponses to their everyday problems. Here, we wished to examine the effects of moderator variables, such as academic achievement, sex, and locus of control, on adolescent coping strategies. These variables were expected to have significant effects upon the use of emotion-focused coping. Since homeless adolescents possess fewer coping resources than others their age, we predicted that problem-focused efforts coping efforts would only be made in response to interpersonal difficulties with other children.

Other hypotheses included the following:

o Low academic achievers should be more likely to use

emotion-focused coping than achievers.

- Children with an external locus of control should be more likely to use emotion-focused coping than those with an internal locus of control.
- Girls were expected to a) report fewer interpersonal problems and b) engage in substantially more emotion-focused coping efforts than boys. (Females have been found to be more interpersonally oriented (Hall, 1986); however, they are also likely to undervalue their own contributions and abilities (Major, McFarlin, & Gagnon, 1984).

Method

Subjects

One hundred seventy-six mother-child dyads were extensively interviewed for the study. Children participating in the study were evenly divided in terms of gender and ranged from 9 to 14 years old.

Unfortunately, due to high mobility, absenteeism, and limited English proficiency, many children in our sample had not taken the achievement tests. Test scores were available for only 43% (76) of the children interviewed. Of the children with achievement test scores, 45% (34) were performing at or above grade level on the Math Achievement Test (MAT).

Slide #1

The mean age for homeless mothers was 35. Sixty-one percent were Black, 31% Hispanic, 3% White, and 5% fell into another category. On the average, 11th grade was the highest grade completed.

The average length of time spent by homeless families in the hotel-shelter system was 13 months. Hotels in midtown Manhattan included the Bryant, Hamilton Place, Lenox Family Center, the Madison and the Prince George. The remaining 39 families were living in hotels located in other boroughs.

A sample of 199 low-SES children of comparable age and ethnicity were surveyed about their typical programs and were administered a later version of the Adolescent Coping Inventory (ACI). Since the two forms of the ACI differed somewhat, we cannot compare coping strategies used by the two groups.

Design and Procedure

Criteria for inclusion in the study required children to be between 9 and 14 years old and to have lived within the hotel-shelter system for a minimum of six months[1]. The response rate was 76%, including nine incomplete dyads or 69% with the incomplete interviews discounted.

We developed the "Adolescent Coping Inventory" (ACI) based on the adult scale created by Folkman and Lazarus (1986). This was piloted on 277 inner-city, housed school children of similar socioeconomic status. The final form of the ACI contained 35

items.

Slide #2

Additional measures included the Paulhus Spheres of Control (SOC) scale (Paulhus, 1983), the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (Barrera, 1981), and a series of questions probing specific social relationships. Interviews with the children lasted about one hour, and each child was paid $5.00 for participation.

Results

Type of Problem

The types of problems experienced by homeless and poor housed children are substantially different from those reported for middle-class children.

Slide #3

An investigation of children in suburban Denver (Dise-Lewis, 1988) yielded four different types of typical stresses for this age group: a) crisis events (e.g., death of a parent, arrest by police); b) routine events (taking gym class, competing in academics or sports); c) role changes (school suspension, arguments with family, dating); and d) internal events or worries (concerns

about competence, lying, goodness).

Slide #4

Not surprisingly, suburban middle-class and urban poor adolescents worry about very different types of problems. However, the problems experienced by homeless and housed children fell into the same four categories; these two groups differed only in the frequency with which problems within these categories were reported. When asked to discuss their biggest problem of the previous month, homeless children were far more likely to focus on interpersonal conflicts and environmental stresses than were housed children. Housed children were twice as likely to report problems associated with their families ($p < .001$).

A principal components factor analysis with orthogonal (varimax) rotation revealed five conceptually different coping dimensions used by homeless children.

Slide #5

Our final scales were comprised of one problem-focused and four emotion-focused coping strategies[2]. Problem-focused coping for both groups of children involved only confrontive strategies. Neither group used strategies which could be defined as planful problem solving.

Positive Reappraisal included items such as "I changed something about myself," or "I became a better person because of it."

Seeking Social Support included "Talked to someone about how I was feeling," or "I asked someone in my family what to do."

Examples of Distancing include: "Went on with my life as if nothing had happened," and "Refused to let it get to me; refused to think about it too much."

Confrontive: "Tried to get the person who did it to change his or her mind," or Took it out on other people."

Self-Blame: "Realized it was my fault," or "Blamed or got mad at myself."

Slide #6

Homeless adolescents varied their use of certain coping strategies according to the problem:

- Positive reappraisal was used significantly more often for problems involving school than for other problems.
- Self-blame was employed more often to handle family problems than for any other situation. (However, self-blame was also used to handle school problems more often than for interpersonal difficulties or environmental problems ($p < .025$).

Achievers vs. Nonachievers

Type of problem. Both achievers and nonachievers were equally likely to report family problems.

As might be expected, only one achieving child volunteered a problem relating to school in comparison with 20% of the nonachievers who discussed this type of problem. Nonachievers were also more likely to report interpersonal conflicts whereas achievers reported a larger proportion of environmental stresses encountered through living conditions, safety issues, and embarrassment about living in a welfare hotel ($p < .001$).

Slide #7

Across all problems, nonachievers used positive reappraisal and distancing more than achievers did.

- o Achievers used higher levels of distancing for interpersonal conflicts;
- o Nonachievers used higher levels of distancing for family and environmental problems ($p < .05$).

Confrontive coping. Nonachievers were more likely to use confrontation to handle their problems than were achievers ($p < .01$).

Social support. Nonachievers were significantly more likely to seek social support than were achievers ($p < .05$).

Slide #8

Achievers, on the other hand, reported getting along better with their fathers than did nonachievers ($p < .02$). They also had a better relationship with their mothers than did nonachievers ($p < .003$).

Forty-eight percent of children who achieved in school had a same-age best friend versus 22% who had an older and 19% who had a younger best friend. In contrast, 39% of nonachievers had a younger, 37% had an older, and 24% had a same-age best friend ($p < .05$).

Achievers were also more likely to have school friends who did not live in a welfare hotel ($p < .01$). Considering the total number of friends homeless children perceived to be available for a range of social support functions, nonachievers reported a significantly larger number ($p < .005$).

Gender Differences

Contrary to our hypothesis, girls did not have lower levels of interpersonal conflict. Other significant gender differences were found, however. Boys accounted for two-thirds of the school problems; only one-third of these problems were reported by girls. The reverse was true for problems relating to environmental stress.

Girls were twice as likely to report these latter problems as were boys ($p < .02$).

Slide #9

Compared to boys, girls were

- o more insecure concerning their ability to handle their problems ($p < .01$);
- o more likely to use distancing ($p < .04$);
- o and also more likely to seek social support ($p < .03$).

Slide #10

Sixty-eight percent of boys who reported interpersonal problems used low levels of distancing; in contrast, 63% of the girls reporting these problems used high levels of distancing ($p < .001$).

Slide #11

Confrontation was a strategy which also differentiated boys from girls. Sixty-two percent of boys used low levels of confrontive coping to handle interpersonal conflicts. The reverse was true for girls: 74% used high levels of confrontive coping for their interpersonal difficulties ($p < .001$).

Locus of Control

Slide #12

Youngsters with an external locus of control reported using more positive reappraisal ($p < .005$) and confronted others more frequently in response to their problems ($p < .001$) than did internal youngsters.

Conclusion

The problems of low income, inner-city adolescents differ substantially from those experienced by middle-class children in this age range. Homeless and housed poor children reported similar problems which differed in frequency according to circumstances. For instance, homeless adolescents experienced a significantly greater frequency of interpersonal conflict in their daily experience than did housed children. However, the substantially greater conflict experienced by the homeless might be accounted for by the isolation and rejection they experience from school peers as a consequence of their social status (Horowitz, et al., 1988). This situation would certainly create and exacerbate interpersonal differences.

Overall, a portrait emerged of the homeless child who was achieving in school despite a chaotic family life. Compared to

nonachievers, achievers had

- o an internal locus of control;
- o higher quality social relationships;
- o more worries about their surroundings;
- o far fewer school problems;
- o fewer interpersonal difficulties;
- o and lower dependence upon certain types of emotion-focused coping strategies (i.e., positive reappraisal, distancing,and seeking social support).

Interesting, it was not the number of social relationships that were important to achievers but the specific type of relationship. Although nonachievers reported a larger number of friends they could call upon for social support, achieving adolescents reported a better or higher quality relationship with both their mothers and fathers than did nonachievers. Good parental relationships are thought to be a particularly important factor in children's development of satisfying peer relationships (Sarason, et al., 1991; Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). Achievers were also more likely to have a same-age best friend whereas nonachievers were more likely to have a younger or older best friend. Same-age friends at school would indicate a better integration in classroom activities.

Whereas the achieving homeless adolescent appears to be a somewhat self-reliant individual, nonachievers appear to be more

reliant on other people for advice, loans, etc., have an external locus of control, and are more likely to blame others for their problems. Their larger number of friends available for social support functions may represent greater neediness on their part or lack of confidence in their own abilities to handle the problem. High external nonachievers were also responsible for a large proportion of the interpersonal conflict problems reported by homeless children.

Although boys and girls were equally represented among the achievers, girls resembled nonachievers in several ways: they were more insecure, more likely to seek social support, and and more likely to use both distancing and confrontation tactics than were boys, particularly in attempting to handle interpersonal problems. This is in keeping with other research findings (Endler & Parker, 1990; Block, 1976) where 1) women and 2) anxious subjects have engaged in more emotion-focused coping than men or nonanxious subjects respectively. The finding concerning use of distancing and confrontation tactics would question the general perception that all females at all times are more highly skilled interpersonally.

Finally, it is important to think about continued research in this area. Our findings underline the basic similarities between the homeless and disadvantaged, housed families. This greatly increases the number of children who need help in coping with their circumstances to achieve satisfying lives. Also, the number of

homeless families is again growing. In November, 1990 when our first year follow-up interviews were completed, most of the homeless families in our sample were living in permanent housing. During that same month, we called eight of the welfare hotels we had sampled and discovered there were 491 new families registered in these hotels.

We concur with Compas (1987) in the need for longitudinal studies of coping behavior in children to assess both a variety of situations as well as multiple incidents of similar situations. Such result will provide important information differentiating coping style from situational specific coping. Progress in this area will depend upon our developing assessment instruments with strong psychometric properties (Endler & Parker, 1990).

Building upon results from the study reported here, Randall Sowder, Dana Flamenbaum, Nelson Reynosa and myself are developing an expanded version of the Adolescent Coping Inventory for use with disadvantaged children. An entirely new scale has been added and various items have changed substantially from the instrument reported here. We think this will be a much improved instrument for measuring coping strategies. Hopefully, it will guide us towards interventions which allow disadvantaged urban adolescents to worry about 'routine' problems, such as dating or gym class, rather than personal safety or conflict issues.

References

Barrera, Jr., M. (1981). Social support in the adjustment of pregnant adolescents: Assessment issues. In B. H. Gottlieb (Ed.). Social Networks and Social Support, Vol. 4. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Studies in Community Mental Health.

Bassuk, E. L., Rubin, L., & Lauriat, A. S. (1986). Characteristics of sheltered homeless families. American Journal of Public Health, 76, (9), 1097-1101.

Board of Education (1989). School achievement data. New York City: Office of Research, Evaluation and Assessment.

Compas, B. E. (1987). Coping with stress during childhood and adolescence. Psychological Bulletin, 101, 393-403.

Dise-Lewis, J. E. (1988). The life events and coping inventory: An assessment of stress in children. Psychosomatic Medicine, 50, 484-499.

Endler, N. S., & Parker, J. D. A. (1990). Multidimensional assessment of coping: A critical evaluation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58, 844-854.

Folkman, S., Lazarus, R. S., Gruen, R. J., & Delongis, A. (1986). Appraisal, coping, health status, and psychological symptoms. Journal of personality and Social Psychology, 50, 571-579.

Glyshaw, K., Cohen, L. H., & Towbes, L. C. (1989). Coping strategies and psychological distress: Prospective analyses of early and middle adolescents. American Journal of

Community Psychology, 17, 607-623.

Hall, J. A. (1986). On explaining gender differences: The case of nonverbal communication. In P. Shaver (Ed.), Review of personality and social psychology (Vol. 7). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Horowitz, S. V., Springer, C. M., & Kose, G. (Spring, 1988). Stress in hotel children: The efflects of homelessness on attitudes toward school. Children's Environments Quarterly, 5, 34-36.

Major, B., McFarlin, D. B., & Gagnon, D. (1984). Overworked and underpaid: On the nature of gender differences in personal entitlement. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 47, 1399-1412.

Masten, A. S. (1989). In D. Cicchetti (Ed.), The emergence of a discipline: Rochester symposium on developmental psychopathology (pp. 261-293). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

Masten, A. S., & Garmezy, N. (1985). In B. B. Lahey & A. E. Kazdin (Eds.), Advances in clinical child psychology, Vol. 8, (pp. 1-52). New York: Plenum Press.

Paulhus, D. (1983). Sphere-specific measures of perceived control. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 44, 1253-1265.

Rafferty, Y., & Rollins, N. (1989). Learning in limbo: The educational deprivation of homeless children. Long Island

City, NY: Advocates for Children of New York, Inc.

Redlener, I. E., & Horowitz, S. V. (1990). Homeless, indigent children: Health, education and developmental potential. (Progress Report: Year I). New York, NY: Author.

Sarason, B. R., Pierce, G. R., Shearin, E. N., Sarason, I. G., Waltz, J. A., & Poppe, L. (1991). Perceived social support and working models of self and actual others. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 60, 273-287.

Sroufe, L. A., & Fleeson, J. (1986). Attachment and the construction of relationships. In W. W. Hartup & Z. Rubin (Eds.), Relationships and development (pp. 51-71). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Werner, E. E., & Smith, R. S. (1982). Vulnerable but invincible: A longitudinal study of resilient children and youth. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Footnotes

[1] Six months is the minimal time it takes for a child to experience the full impact of life in the hotel-shelter system (Monroe, 1982).

[2] The version of the ACI used in the current study represents an early stage in the development of this instrument. Later work on this instrument has increased the number of items in the smaller scales, added a new scale, and improved the internal consistency scores (Horowitz, Sowder, Flamenbaum, & Reynosa, 1991).